

Obsolete Home, Garden Pesticides: A Quiet Crisis

Every year dozens of unsuspecting homeowners discover obsolete pesticides in their barns, sheds and basements. Among South Dakota's most common: DDT, arsenic, toxaphene and chlordane--all banned because of health or environmental hazards. Federal law prevents their use or sale. And legal disposal of a mere pint of DDT can cost the homeowner hundreds of dollars.

Past state sponsored programs have successfully collected and disposed of nearly 90 tons of obsolete pesticides. Experts agree such efforts--although expensive-- are a bargain compared to the cost of the potentially damaging incidents that could occur from these materials.

For many, the term "hazardous waste site" creates dramatic images: indiscriminate dumping of toxic chemicals and teams of clean-up specialists wearing respirators and protective suits. Few people envision their own homes or back yards. But that's just where tons of hazardous waste in the form of obsolete pesticides can be found today.

DDT, dioxin containing 2,4,5-T, and compounds of arsenic, mercury or lead.....These products hardly spelled dread when introduced after World War II. Conventional wisdom revered them as astonishing tools...and for good reason. DDT, for instance, was a showcase for the Green Revolution proven by its tremendous increase in agricultural yields. Public health officials also praised DDT for its unprecedented control over insect-borne diseases, ridding entire nations of malaria, yellow fever, and typhus. With better living through chemistry so evident, few farmers or home gardeners were without a supply of these marvels of the day.

Then came better science. We learned about bioaccumulation when eagles and other raptor populations fell dramatically. Medicine showed us that several products--through application practices or consumption in the food supply--contributed to acute health problems as well as cancer, birth defects, and organ damage in humans.

Products posing these hazards were canceled--by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Canceled products are considered obsolete along with currently registered products which have become caked, frozen or otherwise rendered unusable. Moreover, the health and environmental risks associated with obsoletes make them hazardous wastes, thereby placing exhaustive liabilities upon anyone having such left-over materials in their possession.

Is Your Tool Shed A Hazardous Waste Site?

Based upon a 1990 national survey, the EPA estimates one million households have products containing chlordane. DDT products were found in 150,000 households, while heptachlor and silvex (2,4,5-T) were reported in 70,000 and 85,000 homes, respectively. These products were canceled for varied hazards to humans or wildlife.

South Dakota, too, has its share of obsoletes--usually inherited by individuals when purchasing a home or farm or discovered when giving an old barn or shed the spring cleaning it's been needing for years. South Dakotan's contacting the Department of Ag and the Cooperative Extension Service of these finds have reported amounts ranging from a few ounces to a ton or more.

"Individuals holding obsolete products are put in a regulatory dilemma," notes SDDA's Tim Hagen. "On one hand, pesticide laws say these materials cannot be used or sold. And environmental laws view them as hazardous waste. That means they may only be collected, transported and disposed of by specially licensed contractors. This can be prohibitively expensive for individual homeowners and farmers, costing several hundreds of dollars just to ship one pint."

In an effort to alleviate the problem, of disposal cost for an individual to have their obsolete products properly disposed of, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture is currently conducting annual collections of obsolete pesticides. This program, established during the 1992 legislative session, as HB 1273 authorized the department to set up collection sites and secure Hazardous Waste contractors for transportation, storage and disposal of all acceptable products.

How Does The Collection Process Work?

All products that are to be considered for disposal through the Unusable Pesticide program must be pre-registered with the Department of Agriculture (Pre-registration forms are available from the Cooperative Extension Service and from the Department of Ag). Once the pre-registration has reached the Department of Ag., each product will be evaluated to determine if it fits the criteria for disposal. Those criteria are; the product is no longer labeled for use by the US EPA; the product has no label and cannot be properly identified; the product has been damaged by the weather, ie: a dry product that has gotten wet and is caked or a liquid product that has separated and will not go back into solution; a product that is in a container that is deteriorating; or a product that is more than 20 years old.

Once the products have been evaluated the registrant will be notified by mail, the status of the products that they have registered. If the registrant has acceptable products they will be notified 2 weeks prior to the collection, which is to be held closest to them. The

letter will also give instructions to the collection site and instructions for packaging the products for transport to the collection site.

At the collection site the registrant will be asked to complete a survey and the products will be unloaded by the Hazardous Waste Contractor Personnel. Once the product has been unloaded the registrant has successfully transferred ownership of the product and also the liability associated with it.

For more information about the Unusable Pesticide Program contact the South Dakota Department of Agriculture or your local Cooperative Extension Service office.